

## Panama

### Update on the context and situation of children

Panama had the largest economic growth in the Latin American Region in 2021 (12% according to CEPAL, 2021). However, it was one of the economies hardest-hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, with its gross domestic product (GDP) contracting by 17.9% in 2020 and its gross national income per capita declining to 2014 levels. Panama lost its high-income economy status in 2021 and is now considered an upper middle-income economy. Panama remains one of the countries with the highest levels of inequality in the Region (World Bank, 2021) and its Gini coefficient is projected to increase 0.5-1.4% over the coming years (CEPAL, 2021). Poverty, which is also expected to increase by 7 points, is six times higher in rural areas than in urban areas (IDB, 2020).

Several structural factors underlie high and persistent inequality in Panama, including low social spending and centralized public investment (e.g., the richest province in the country has an average of 28% more investment per capita than the median). Panama spends 9% of its GDP on social budgets, compared with a regional average of 11%. This includes 1.3% of Panama's GDP invested in social protection, compared with the Latin America and the Caribbean average of 3.4% (IDB, 2020). An estimated 25% of the 453,000 children in multidimensional poverty benefit from the largest social protection program *Red de Oportunidades* (UNICEF, 2019) and although a parallel emergency program, *Panama Solidario*, and other relief measures were established to mitigate the socio-economic impact of the pandemic, none were child-sensitive.

In this scenario of increased poverty and inequality, without medium- or long-term social protection measures to address the long-lasting effects of the pandemic on children, their protection and healthy development is at risk, especially for those experiencing multiple and intersectional forms of exclusion such as children living in poverty, indigenous and Afro-descendant children, those living in peri-urban areas, children in migration, children with a disability and those without parental care. In 2021, the national government took decisive steps towards: improving comprehensive services for early childhood; re-opening schools and making face-to-face education mandatory in 2022; a new law creating a comprehensive child protection system; and the transition from residential care to family-based modalities for children separated from their families.

**EARLY CHILDHOOD:** Investing in early childhood is a priority of the current government in Panama, according to their Strategic Plan 2020-2024. A new law for increasing the coverage and improving the quality of services for children aged 0-8 years was approved in 2020. However, infant mortality has remained unchanged since 2016 (14 deaths per 1,000 births), with rates in “comarcas” (i.e., provincial-level indigenous regions) being 6-14 points above national average (MINSA, 2020). Approximately 10% of children have a low birth weight and, prior to the pandemic, 16% of under-5s were affected by stunting. Stunting rates are three times higher in *comarcas* and they are likely to increase due to the suspension of school feeding programs – in July 2021, approximately 67% of families with children in the lowest income bracket reported not having enough food. Infant immunization rates fell from 95% in 2019 to 70% in 2021. Vaccines such as MMR only reached 40% coverage.

**EDUCATION:** Schools in Panama have been closed for over 21 months, affecting more than 800,000 children from preschool to secondary school. The educational system maintained some form of continuity through distance-learning (87% of families reported that their children received distance-learning in July 2021 according to a UNICEF telephone household survey) and by the end of the school-year, 51% of schools nationwide were open and providing part-time classes. However, it is estimated that 90% of students will not achieve the minimum level of performance due to lack of face-

to-face education (World Bank, 2021). According to the ERCE 2019 test, the quality of education in Panama was already amongst the worst in LAC before the pandemic with groups suffering from exclusion (i.e., indigenous children) showing lower achievement rates in literacy and numeracy in 3rd and 6th grade. At the end of 2021, the Government committed to fully reopening schools for the 2022 school year.

According to a recent study by UNICEF and the Ministry of Education, before the pandemic 129,000 children in Panama were already out of school and 192,000 were at risk of dropping out. 17% of adolescents and young adults were Not in Education, Employment or Training, with an over-representation of young women in unpaid domestic work (MITRADEL & OIT, 2019). In a situation of school closure and restricted household income, adolescents face a more adverse scenario with respect to completing secondary education, continuing tertiary education, and entering the labor market.

**VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN:** According to a UNICEF telephone household survey, violence against children is likely to have increased in 2021 due to additional family stressors in the COVID-19 context and to interruptions in the limited preventive services in schools and the community. While in 2020, 31% of families with children reported family conflict due to confinement, numbers increased to 50% in 2021. The percentage of caregivers experiencing mental health symptoms increased from 48% in 2020 to 58% in 2021. Many families described a gradual deterioration of children's mental health due to confinement and school closures, with 32% of children reporting symptoms in 2021, 12 points higher than in 2020.

The situation of children on the move requires special attention. In 2021, over 28,000 children entered the country after crossing the dangerous Darien jungle on foot in their journey to the North – 77% were under five. Children represented 22% of migrants who transited this route – 15 times more than the previous year. The number of unaccompanied and separated children increased (over 200 in 2021), as well as reports of sexual violence on the route.

In 2021, the situation of children in institutions and the violation of their rights received widespread public attention. The Government and Parliament committed to adopting a new law, which would create a comprehensive child protection system for the first time in Panama, and to progressively transit to family-based care in cases of special protection.

## Major contributions and drivers of results

UNICEF is delivering emergency response and development assistance, prioritizing lifesaving interventions for children on the move, influencing legislation and budgets, providing high-level technical assistance, and modeling interventions for results at scale to ensure all children in Panama have access to early childhood services, are protected from all forms of violence, complete quality education, and have opportunities to participate in decisions affecting them.

### **EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT (ECD)**

In 2021, UNICEF contributed to early childhood development (ECD) legislation and provided high-level technical assistance to the Government to improve access to and quality of multisectoral early childhood services.

In terms of health services, UNICEF provided technical assistance to the Ministry of Health to **implement a tool for measuring and monitoring child development**. The tool was piloted in the Herrera Province and will be scaled up in 2022. UNICEF also provided **technical assistance to the National Program of Maternal and Infant Health to update standards of care for children aged 0 -9**. Medical teams from the Ministry of Health, Social Services and professional bodies will review

and validate the updated standards before implementation nationwide in 2022. Finally, UNICEF and the Ministry of Health agreed to **develop a guide for detection and intervention in cases of malnutrition**, including validation/adoption of the Mid-Upper Arm Circumference tape as a diagnostic tool, implementation of an Infant and Young Children Feeding guide in emergency contexts and the implementation of restrictions on the marketing of breast-milk substitutes.

UNICEF worked with the Ministry of Social Development to **establish biosecurity guidelines and protocols for the reopening of ECD centers**, which were closed due to COVID-19 restrictions. These guidelines/protocols allowed the reopening of 141 ECD centers nationwide in 2021, benefiting 2,290 children. This experience will inform the reopening of the remaining 1,300 centers in 2022. UNICEF also provided high-level technical assistance to the Ministry of Social Development to **update the National Roadmap of Comprehensive Services for Early Childhood**. This process involved the participation of all relevant sectors at the national and sub-national levels to improve the quality of services and identify adaptations/investments needed to ensure nationwide coverage.

UNICEF supported the Ministry of Education in the **implementation of quality standards in pre-school education, through the piloting of training programs for teachers, which will inform national changes to the training curriculum**. In partnership with the non-governmental organization (NGO) Enseña por Panama, over 300 teachers were trained to interact with children in a nurturing and supportive manner. UNICEF and Enseña por Panama also developed and disseminated 48 informational videos on nurturing care targeting parents, which have been viewed over 500,000 times. Finally, UNICEF collaborated with the Ministry of Education in a pilot training program for teachers on the basic rights of pre-school children, which includes educational interventions to ensure all children can read and write by the age of 8. Experiences from these pilots will be used to scale-up training programs nationwide in 2022.

**To develop and test participatory governance mechanisms and to increase the allocation of resources for sub-national services**, the Child Friendly Provinces Initiative is being implemented in the Province of Panama Oeste. In 2021, under the leadership of the provincial government, two townships with the highest levels of child deprivation (according to the Multidimensional Poverty Index) implemented the initiative. Over 20 institutions as well as children and adolescents participated in the process. A preliminary situational analysis of early childhood services in these townships was conducted, which recognized the importance of tackling social norms and cultural practices to ensure healthy development. A work plan for improving ECD services at sub-national level and increasing their reach is currently being developed with technical assistance from UNICEF. Evidence from this pilot in Panama Oeste will be used to influence changes in the national regulatory framework, impacting children at-scale.

## EDUCATION

Panama had one of the longest school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2021, UNICEF prioritized **interventions to ensure that all children could continue their education and return to school**. In 2021, 2,360 schools (51% of the total) re-opened with partial classes. In December, the Government announced compulsory face-to-face learning in all schools nationwide starting in March 2022 (National Decree 2077). UNICEF was one of the most outspoken advocates of school reopening and led a multisectoral national alliance with other international organizations, civil society partners, associations of health professionals, the private sector, students, and parents to ensure that all children could return to school and that teachers were prioritized in the vaccination roll-out. The advocacy strategy was strengthened with rigorous evidence from a representative telephone household survey

about the access and quality of distance learning, which brought to light increased inequalities between those in public and private schooling. UNICEF also provided technical assistance to the Ministry of Education for implementing hybrid modalities and support strategies such as one-on-one/home tutoring.

Prolonged school closure has highlighted an urgent need to prevent and address school exclusion. In 2021, UNICEF began a **series of strategic contributions to prevent school dropout**. Using the UNESCO-UIS/UNICEF methodology of the Out-of-School Children Initiative, a comprehensive assessment of factors associated with school dropout was conducted. This study included an analysis of bottlenecks and opportunities for preventing school exclusion, as well as an in-depth assessment of the impact of COVID-19 on the educational system. The Ministry of Education is using this evidence to design and prioritize actions to be implemented in 2022, including improvement of education management information systems for early alerts and the piloting of flexible and accelerated education modalities. UNICEF also provided high-level technical assistance to the Ministry of Education in the establishment of a roadmap for inclusive education.

## PROTECTION FROM ALL FORMS OF VIOLENCE

Establishing a Comprehensive Child Protection System was a recommendation of the Committee on the Rights of the Child's fifth and sixth periodic reports on Panama (CRC/C/PAN/5-6), as well as in its 20011 third and fourth reports (CRC/C/PAN/3-4). In 2021, **after more than two decades of relentless advocacy and close technical support from UNICEF, the National Assembly discussed a draft law that establishes the structure of such a comprehensive system**. This law was approved by the Assembly in January 2022.

In its new Country Program 2021-2025, UNICEF recognizes the need to change social norms that perpetuate violence against children. This year, UNICEF contributed to this goal by **strengthening community networks and generating evidence for the design of a Communication for Development strategy to be rolled out in 2022 with the aim of reducing disciplinary violence and improving parenting practices**. In partnership with faith-based organizations, UNICEF led the development of a joint taskforce for the prevention of violence against children and the promotion of positive parenting in Colon, a province characterized by high levels of violence and several grassroots movements demanding social change. Over 900 children and 1,300 caregivers benefitted from training on positive parenting. UNICEF also contributed to skill development among community partners from civil society, faith-based organizations, local and national governments. A mixed-method study to determine knowledge, attitudes, practices, and social norms related to parenting was conducted with UNICEF support. Results from this study will be used to design a Communication for Development strategy, to be rolled out at national level in the first quarter of 2022.

UNICEF remained an outspoken **advocate for the deinstitutionalization of all children and provided technical assistance to the government for the development and implementation of family-based alternative care**. UNICEF and the Latin American Foster Care Network (RELAF) conducted a costing of family-based alternative care, which will serve as an important advocacy tool to promote deinstitutionalization. UNICEF also contributed to strengthening the capacity of interdisciplinary teams responsible for managing special protection cases, to avoid unnecessary separation and ensure that families receive appropriate support in their communities.

At the same time, to respond to the crisis and violations of the rights of children in residential institutions, UNICEF and RELAF provided **technical assistance to the national government to improve standards in residential care**. The aim was to offer recommendations to the Ministry of Social Development and the National Secretariat for Children, Adolescents and Family (SENNIAF) to ensure quality care, standardized procedures and efficient and effective case management of children without parental care, and to promote the development of family-based alternative care. Results from this review were presented by UNICEF at the December 2021 meeting of the National Committee for

Children and Adolescents, presided by the Minister of Social Development. UNICEF and RELAF also supported the development of a tool for SENNIAF to monitor and supervise services in residential care and ensure these are in line with human and child rights standards while the transition to family-based alternative care takes place.

UNICEF, in collaboration with NGO United for Children, **supported the strengthening of capacities of interdisciplinary teams in charge of providing services to child survivors of sexual violence.**

UNICEF funded a pilot training program on psychotherapeutic skills that benefited 3,976 survivors of sexual violence (3,577 girls and 362 boys) and their families. Gender-responsive intervention manuals were reviewed and edited to ensure tools and interventions were age appropriate. Experiences from this pilot will be used to strengthen the quality of training of all psychologists and social workers in the public sector providing services to children survivors of sexual violence.

### EMERGENCY RESPONSE FOR CHILDREN ON THE MOVE

**UNICEF and its partners delivered WASH, nutrition, health, child protection and psychosocial services at all Migratory Reception Stations in Darien.** A sudden increase in migration flow (over 15 times higher than previous years), changes in migratory routes, and an increase in violent events in the jungle (including sexual violence) demanded constant refinement and scaling-up of UNICEF response. Services for boys and girls were guaranteed and coordinated, thanks to the ongoing assistance and advocacy of UNICEF at national and local level, as well as strong partnerships with the Government and NGOs.

For the first time, unaccompanied and separated children, as well as local children with protection needs in Darien, were no longer placed in detention centers. In July 2021, in partnership with Aldeas SOS, UNICEF established **a family-type home in Darien that provides a safe space for children needing special protection measures.** Of the 200 unaccompanied/separated children who were registered as crossing the Panama-Colombia border, 115 were housed and received care in this family-type home, “La Casita”. La Casita is a temporary solution while UNICEF continues advocating and providing technical assistance for the establishment of a family-based care system. UNICEF also worked with the Provincial Child Protection Authorities in Darien to strengthen inter-institutional coordination.

More than 15,000 children and adults on the move (37% girls, 37% boys, and 26% caregivers) received **psychosocial support and early stimulation through Child-Friendly Spaces** managed by UNICEF in partnership with RET. Of those who received support, 93% rated the service as excellent. This psychosocial service is lifesaving, as crossing the Darien jungle is one of the most traumatic and life-threatening parts of the journey to the North, where many children and women survive sexual violence. **Over 34 child survivors of sexual violence and their families benefited from specialized support** thanks to UNICEF’s partnership with HIAS.

**WASH services were delivered regularly** by UNICEF in partnership with the International Federation of the Red Cross in all four Migratory Reception Stations in Darien and in host communities, contributing to reducing COVID-19 transmission and guaranteeing conditions of basic dignity. Over 60,000 people benefited from clean water in 2021. Non-food items were distributed, including mats, hygiene kits, buckets, jerrycans, and mosquito nets. Maternal and child health services and the supply of medicines and supplements were also delivered to more than 9,000 people. Additionally, through monitoring by UNICEF and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), children who were born in transit through Panama received identity documents.

For a real-time visualization of UNICEF and its partners response, including people reached through emergency services in Darien, [click here](#). Human Interest Stories and other multimedia can be found [here](#).

### PARTICIPATION

**As a contribution towards developing national systems and platforms to ensure the participation of children and adolescents**, UNICEF, in close collaboration with UNPD, has established a work plan for ensuring adolescent participation in climate action. This work plan began with Panama becoming a signatory of the Declaration on Children, Youth and Climate Action. A total of 276 youth activists from Panama participated in a climate change survey prior to COP26. The results were presented in a meeting with Panama's Minister of Foreign Affairs and shared with other national authorities who attended COP26, including the President. UNICEF contributed to the empowerment and skill building of youth leaders and youth organizations through training on advocacy for climate change in collaboration with the Ministry of Education. In addition, UNICEF and the Ministry of Education launched a training program for teachers to support adolescent participation, as well as the World's Largest Lesson to prompt adolescents' contributions to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. Experiences from both training programs will be used to inform changes to educational curricula for adolescents, ensuring they include elements to promote participation in climate action.

**UNICEF continues to ensure that children and adolescents are part of the design of all its programmatic activities and is contributing to the establishment of innovative platforms for the large-scale participation of adolescents such as U-Report.** Through strong alliances with civil society partners and the Ministry of Education, 2,500 adolescents expressed their views and needs through U-Report in 2021 on issues such as mental health, access to education during COVID-19, climate action, vocational training, skills for entrepreneurship and more. U-Reporters presented recommendations to high-level authorities, such as the Ministers of Education, of Social Development and of Foreign Affairs. UNICEF will continue to use U-Report as a tool for participation, advocacy and bidirectional communication with adolescents.

#### COMMUNICATIONS AND PRIVATE SECTOR ENGAGEMENT

In 2021, UNICEF convened several advocacy partnerships, in education, child protection, climate change and mental health. **Over 25 organizations partnered with UNICEF to advocate for the rights of children** and over 149,000 people amplified UNICEF's messages in social media. The situation of children on the move gained global and national media attention thanks to UNICEF's consistent advocacy with high-quality media pieces, including human interest stories. UNICEF and the Latin American Centre of Journalism (CELAP) launched the third edition of the Prize for Journalism on Children to promote media pieces that advance the cause of children.

In terms of **strategic public-private partnerships to mobilize resources for the cause of children**, UNICEF established a partnership with the Ministry of Education and TIGO Telecommunications to improve teachers' technological skills in the context of distance learning through a program called Connected Teachers. Several **alliances with the mass media were also established**, including with MEDCOM Media Group and TVN Media, which included free airtime for the dissemination of UNICEF key campaigns on child rights. UNICEF also led initiatives **with the business sector to advocate family-friendly policies**, in alliance with SUMARSE, a leading multisectoral association promoting corporate social responsibility. A parenting week campaign was launched in alliance with Cable and Wireless, a telecommunications company, which is a private-sector champion in the country with the longest paid paternity leave policy.

## UN Collaboration and Other Partnerships

UNICEF co-leads Result #4 (Violence Prevention) of the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) and actively contributes to all other UNSDCF Result Groups (Access and Quality of Basic Services, Governance and Participation, Environment and Climate Change). In 2021, **UNICEF contributed to the UN Operational Reform** through improvement of processes for efficiency gain, cost savings, shared services, and an innovative Business Operation Strategy. Panama Country Office champions in mutual recognition in the Region. UNICEF also contributed to inter-agency activities through the **Inter-agency Communications Group and Programmatic Inter-agency Groups including:** (1) the gender inter-agency group, to promote relevant actions in gender equality in collaboration with UN Women, UNFPA, UNDP, OHCHR, IOM and PAHO; (2) the data and evidence taskforce, to coordinate technical assistance towards the measurement of Sustainable Development Goals and the strengthening of the national statistical system, in collaboration with UNDP, IOM, and others; and (3) the human mobility group, to coordinate emergency response for migrants in Darien and across the country, in collaboration with UNHCR, IOM, PAHO, UNFPA, UNAIDS, OHCHR and OCHA.

United Nations results in Panama with a contribution from UNICEF include: (1) influencing the Bicentenary of Panama Pact, ensuring wide societal participation in this process, including children and adolescents; (2) leveraging resources for a Joint Program to advance the rights of people with disabilities, taking into account the rights of children, especially the right to inclusive education; (3) providing close, articulated technical assistance to Panama's participation in the 2021 Food Systems Summit; and (4) ensuring a comprehensive response to mitigate the socio-economic impact of COVID-19, through the UN Socio-economic Response Plan in which UNICEF coordinated Pillar 2 – Protecting People: Social Protection and Basic Services. UNICEF continued to lead inter-agency strategies for the return of all children to schools.

## Lessons Learned and Innovations

**1. UNICEF engagement with authorities and partners is key to influence legislation and budgets. The aim should be to prompt development, implementation, and evaluation of innovations at community level and at scale to ensure the translation of regulatory frameworks into concrete services for children and their families, with a focus on the most vulnerable.**

UNICEF should influence policies and budgets to ensure all children have access to high-quality services while investing in innovative pilot projects at community level to generate the evidence/field knowledge needed to continue advocating for at-scale reforms. A particular emphasis should be placed on establishing a baseline, control groups, independent evaluations, and strategies to use the evidence generated to influence regulatory frameworks and investment in children. Despite its limited resources, the Panama Country Office will endeavor to implement a model in several diverse communities to reach scale and test innovations in different contexts in Panama. Specifically, in 2022, UNICEF will support the national government in the design and implementation of an innovative model for identifying and referring vulnerable children to community services. This work will be done in close cooperation with national, provincial and local authorities, in partnership with civil society and academia, with the involvement of communities and children themselves.

**2. Measuring the impact of UNICEF's advocacy (especially advocacy behind closed doors) and technical assistance remains challenging.**

Measuring the impact of UNICEF's upstream work remains a global challenge. A good example of



this lesson learned at country level was the intensive advocacy and engagement of UNICEF in Panama for the re-opening of schools, as well as its more than 20 years' efforts for the establishment of a comprehensive child protection system. For many months and years, it was difficult to report results and capture progress. 2021 was marked by national successes: the government committed to re-opening schools in 2022 and a law that establishes a comprehensive system was approved by the parliament. However, measuring the sum of UNICEF's contribution to these long-term processes is complex and requires the development of sophisticated approaches and M&E tools.

**3. UNICEF should invest in strengthening the humanitarian-development nexus in Darien, while promoting the sustainability of services by the national government.**

UNICEF should strengthen the humanitarian-development nexus in Darien for several reasons. The migratory crisis in Darien is becoming protracted and the government should consider integrating the emergency services and their funding into its regular planning cycle. The situation provides an opportunity for Panama to strengthen its crisis management capacity, considering the impact of climate change and pandemics on the country. Finally, this crisis is taking place in a province that suffers from significant development challenges, and the humanitarian response could be used to further develop social services for local populations. This approach would support a more flexible response to anticipate and address the unpredictability of the migration routes and flows.

**4. UNICEF can strengthen private sector fundraising with a combination of local and regional providers.**

The initiation of fundraising operations in Panama has faced many challenges in 2021 due, among other reasons, to factors related to the pandemic and the fact that UNICEF is a pioneer in this area. Therefore, the Country Office decided to diversify providers in order ensure the sustainability of actions. Due to the pandemic and its socio-economic impact, ongoing negotiations with banks and other potential corporate allies have been delayed until 2022. Despite the challenges of this changing situation, the Country Office was able to initiate fundraising actions and closed the year with more than 200 individual donors willing to support the UNICEF program in Panama.

**5. An innovation in 2021 was the integration of country and regional administrative services to improve operational efficiency and increase the quality of services.**

In 2021, the Panama Country Office and the Latin America and Caribbean Regional Office decided to integrate their administrative services. Under the *Shared Administrative Services* (SAS), managed at the Operations Section of the Panama Country Office, transactions will be consolidated in order to increase efficiency and improve the quality of services, ensuring more and better results for children. As of February 2022, administration, building maintenance, security, assets, transportation and communications with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs will be processed by the SAS.